WINCHESTER NEWS
A TRUSTED AND RELIABLE SOURCE OF LOCAL NEWS

Donate

DONATE | NEWS | SPORTS | EVENTS | FEATURES | OPINION | NEWSLETTER | CONTACT | ABOUT

NEWS — 2026 TOWN ELECTIONS

School Committee candidates call for teacher reviews, clearer goals at Winchester forum

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER

March 9, 2026 . 11:00 AM — 3 min read

Winchester School Committee candidates Heather von Mering, left, and John Bellaire speak at the League of Women Voters candidate forum on March 5 at the Jenks Center. WINCAM/WINCHESTER NEWS PHOTO/WILL DOWD

Subscribe

John Bellaire and Heather von Mering outlined competing visions for town's public schools at a candidate forum, clashing over technology in

classrooms, special education access and teacher accountability ahead of the March 21 election.

The two are vying for one three-year seat on the Winchester School Committee. The League of Women Voters of Winchester organized the debate at the Jenks Center, with Nell Forgas moderating. WinCam broadcast the event.

Bellaire, who works full time for a national education nonprofit focused on school improvement and funding, is a graduate of Muraco Elementary, McCall Middle School and Winchester High School. He said his professional experience sets him apart.

“Helping schools get better is literally my job. Understanding school funding is literally my job,” Bellaire said in his closing statement.

He added that if elected, he would be the only committee member working full time in education and the only graduate of the district serving on the board.

Von Mering, a working mother of five and former Town Meeting moderator who has served on the Historic Commission and Planning Board, emphasized her advocacy for students with dyslexia, ADHD and language-based learning challenges. She chaired the town’s master plan of 2030 for the Planning Board.

“I believe Winchester schools should be places where every student is seen, heard and supported to thrive,” von Mering said.

The sharpest exchanges came over the role of technology and artificial intelligence. Bellaire said more than 80% of high school students nationally report using AI to complete some coursework and wa
Winchester has no comprehensive policy to address it.

Subscribe

He recalled his own experience as a Muraco fifth grader in 2013, when technology amounted to an hour a week with a rolling laptop cart, before the district introduced a one-to-one screen environment the following year.

“Currently, Winchester Public Schools has no comprehensive policy whatsoever to help deal with AI, and that’s left teachers kind of, you know, coming up with innovative solutions to their classroom,” Bellaire said.

Von Mering called AI a small piece of a larger problem and recommended a technology advisory committee of parents, students, experts and staff.

“If we don’t develop critical thinkers, we will not be able to use AI to the best and highest potential, because we need to be able to be independent thinkers of it,” von Mering said.

Both candidates agreed schools should rebalance computer-based and paper-based resources. Von Mering pointed to studies showing technology is hindering foundational skills in grades K-5. Bellaire described a Minnesota school visit where students drew numbers on laptop trackpads instead of solving equations with pen and paper.

On special education, Bellaire said he spoke with a parent who tried three separate times to get services for her child and was denied each time. He championed the override’s investment in tier-two supports at the elementary level, targeting 15 to 20% of students who need additional help in literacy and math.

Von Mering described the tier-two model as a structured pathway where students are assessed on foundational skills and supported in the classroom first, then moved to short-term interventions. She said that after six months without progress, special education testing should be automatically.

Subscribe

The candidates diverged on measuring school performance. Von Mering said teacher reviews existed before 2020, but were lost during the pandemic and have not been reinstated. She called for restoring them as policy, including 360-degree reviews of the superintendent and principals.

Bellaire said the district's biggest gap is coherence, arguing that teachers in 20 different classrooms across seven buildings would likely give 20 different answers about the schools' goals. He proposed a public data dashboard on the district website.

On student mental health, Bellaire cited district data showing one in four Winchester High School students found their stress and anxiety overwhelming most or all of the time last school year and two in three reported fewer than eight hours of sleep on an average school night. He called the ratio of more than 1,400 students to two adjustment counselors "unacceptable."

Von Mering said helping students manage college anxiety should start in 9th grade with structured conversations rather than waiting until 11th grade.

Both candidates voiced strong support for building a new Muraco Elementary. Bellaire, who attended from 2009 to 2014, said the override includes funding for a feasibility study. Von Mering said every child deserves the same resources available at the recently built Lynch Elementary.

The election is March 21, with early in-person voting beginning March 14.

Will Dowd is a Massachusetts journalist who covers municipal government and community life for Winchester News. He runs The Marblehead Indepe
reader-funded digital newsroom.

Subscribe

Winchester News is a non-profit organization supported by our community. If you appreciate having local Winchester news, please donate to support our work, and subscribe to our free weekly newsletter. Copyright 2026 Winchester News Group, Inc. Copying and sharing with written permission only.

Related

NEWS

Winchester ZBA waives town regulations to move Washington/Swanton project along

Town officials have approved waivers of regulations for a residential/commercial development project at Washington and Swanton streets. The Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) on March 19 approved the waivers for a 40B project at 278-292 Washington St. and 12 and 16-20 Swanton St. in a special meeting preceding a

NEIL ZOLOT | CORRESPONDENT
March 26, 2026

NEWS

John Bellaire, 22, among youngest townwide winners in Winchester history

He won all eight precincts after a door-to-door campaign that emphasized direct voter contact over institutional backing.

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER
March 25, 2026

Subscribe

2026 TOWN ELECTIONS

13 YEARS OF DATA, ONE SATURDAY: Takeaways from Winchester's override vote and the races that surrounded it

Winchester News reviewed precinct-level election results from every annual town election since 2014 — 13 years of data covering turnout, ballot questions, Select Board races, School Committee contests and Planning Board results — and compared them against the March 21 preliminary numbers. The 2026 results have not yet been certified by Town

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER
March 25, 2026

NEWS

With override rejected, Winchester shifts from campaigning to budget planning

After Winchester voters rejected an $11.5 million Proposition 2 1/2 override on Election Day, March 21, the governing question in town has shifted from persuasion to arithmetic. Select Board member Bill McGonigle, who served on the Yes for Winchester campaign, said the defeat has changed how he approaches

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER
March 25, 2026

Latest

NEWS

Winchester ZBA waives town regulations to move Washington/Swanton project along

Town officials have approved waivers of regulations for a residential/commercial development project at Washington and Swanton streets. The Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) on March 19 approved the waivers for a 40B project at 278-292 Washington St. and 12 and 16-20 Swanton St. in a special meeting preceding a

NEIL ZOLOT | CORRESPONDENT

March 26, 2026

NEWS

John Bellaire, 22, among youngest townwide winners in Winchester history

He won all eight precincts after a door-to-door campaign that emphasized direct voter contact over institutional backing.

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER

March 25, 2026

EVENTS

Network for Social Justice to celebrate 35th anniversary

The following was submitted by the Network for Social Justice: The Network For Social Justice turns 35 this spring! There will be a celebration on Saturday, April 11, from 7-9:30 p.m., at the Sons of Italy, 117 Swanton St., Winchester. Connect with your local friends and neighbors as

March 25, 2026

EVENTS

Winchester Community Music School presents Jazz Jam Session

The following was submitted by the Winchester Community Music School: On Saturday, March 28, join the community at Winchester Community Music School, 407 Highland Ave., for a Jazz Jam Session, an afternoon of fun, spontaneous jazz playing, beginning at 3 p.m. Instrumentalists and vocalists of all skill levels are

March 25, 2026

Subscribe

Subscribe to Winchester News

© 2026 Winchester News Group, Inc. Copying and sharing with permission for non-commercial use only.

Subscribe